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ABSTRACT

To help policymakers plan for higher quality education despite increased productivity demands and decreased financial support, this paper briefly reviews trends and issues related to three important areas: school size, grade level organization, and school management practices. Research has yet to discover the perfect school size. Arguments are presented for large schools' ability to provide instructional, extracurricular, and athletic diversity and for small schools' concentration on the basics and the individual student. Various grade level groupings are discussed: middle schools, elementary schools divided into primary (grades 1-3) and higher elementary (grades 4 and 5), and high schools divided into separated units for grades 9-10 and grades 11-12. The various groupings work best if all students remain together as they move from one building to another--to avoid disruption or massive readjustments every two or three years. High school students can be limited in course selections if the separated high school buildings are not on the same campus. Emerging school management trends are centered in two directions: (1) a shift toward instructional leadership responsibility of administrators and (2) an expectation of increased administrator accountability. Another promising development is schools' increasing reliance on shared decision-making by administrative management teams. Complex school issues will need hard work, not ready-made solutions. Included are 11 references. (MLH)

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SCHOOL SIZE, GRADE LEVEL ORGANIZATION, AND SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TRENDS

A Briefing Paper presented to the Task Force

Oak Hills Local Schools

Cincinnati, Ohio

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by

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OAK HILLS BRIEFING PAPER:

SCHOOL SIZE, GRADE LEVEL ORGANIZATION, AND

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TRENDS

As school districts across the nation face changing and often competing demands for increased educational productivity along with decreased financial support and great declines in student enrollment, policy makers have considered many strategies designed to make less go further for fewer students while not disrupting the quality of education. This paper presents a brief review of trends and issues related to three important areas typically considered by educational planners as they seek paths of action for the future: School size, grade level organization, and school management practices. Experience shows that these are three topics of great interest to school district decision makers faced with recommending changes in existing policies and procedures (Wachtel and Powers, 1979). The specific purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide the Oak Hills Task Force with an outline of some of the most recent thinking about possible answers to the following questions:

- What is the "right" size for schools?
- What are some alternative ways of organizing schools, insofar as different grade level groupings are concerned?
- What current directions are being followed in the area of school management?

Let us return to each of these three areas of concern to see if some answers can be found.

School Size

It is extremely tempting to try to look to educational researchers to

find the definitive answer to the question of what size school is most effective. Of perhaps equal concern to those who face potential decisions as school closings or massive redistricting is the related question of how big or how small a school can be before it becomes ineffective. Policy makers might have a much easier time in facing some of the critical decisions of the future if there was some clear-cut, absolute agreement as to the "right" size for schools. For example, decisions would be much more simple to make if we had answers to such questions as, "Do students learn better in an elementary school with fewer than 300 pupils, as contrasted with schools enrolling 500 or more?" "Does a high school with an enrollment of 3,000 do a better job of educating students than a school with 1,500? If so, why not consolidate schools so that the smallest high schools would have no fewer than 3,000 to 4,000 students?" Research about precise "right" sizes for schools and classes is generally inconclusive and, at times, contradictory. Consider, for example, the ongoing debate concerning the best single class size. Glass and Smith (1978) reviewed a lot of existing research on the subject and concluded that there was a positive relationship between smaller classes and increases in student achievement. Other researchers (Cahen & Filby, 1979) disagreed with this and indicated that the vast majority of research does not indicate that class size is an important part of determining student achievement.

On the schoolwide level, Divoky (1979), the Educational Research Service (1980), and Wharton, Baudin, and Griffith (1981) have noted that there is no apparent relationship between the size of a school and student achievement, defined typically as performance on standardized tests of reading, language arts, and mathematics. Other studies have looked at the relationship between

school size and other measures of school effectiveness. One researcher, John Goodlad, has recently examined an array of characteristics that seem to have an effect on making some schools better than others. He concluded (1983) that elementary schools with fewer than 300 students and secondary schools with no more than 600 to 500 students appeared to be "good schools." Goodlad's assessment was based largely on the factors that appear to be found in schools where particular care is taken to improve the social and emotional development of students. Goodlad's study is receiving a good deal of publicity today, but some researchers criticize his findings as attempts to make absolute statements concerning the "best" way to do things in all schools.

Given the fact that researchers have not (and perhaps cannot) provide the final answer regarding perfect school sizes, what can be said about decisions that might need to be made in this area? To a large extent, we must rely on the experiences and judgments of professional educators who find pros and cons in the debate over large schools v. small schools.

There are those who, for a number of reasons, would argue that large size is a desirable characteristic of schools. In this view, larger schools are good because they are able to provide more diverse instructional offerings to meet the different needs and interests of students. Courses that might not be feasible because they are too "exotic" and do not attract many students--courses such as advanced foreign languages or science--can be offered in schools with large enrollments. Even more significant are the many additional opportunities that exist in large schools for student participation in many different extracurricular and athletic activities. A large school makes it more likely that activities that ordinarily do not attract a lot of students can be offered. Finally, the most frequent argument in favor of large schools is the fact that larger schools are more efficient to operate and are therefore

more responsive to community financial interests. There is no question that, due to the costs of building maintenance and necessary support staff it,costs considerably more to operate two buildings with 500 students in each than a single large building with 1,000 students.

Those who favor smaller schools note that, while it may be true that some instructional diversity might be sacrificed in smaller schools, instruction in the "basics" will not suffer. In fact, with fewer distracting elective courses, schools can focus more attention on improving instruction in critical skill areas. Small school advocates also note that, while the number of extra-curricular activities might be increased in large schools, there is still no guarantee that a higher percentage of students will participate. Small schools still provide ample opportunities for students to become involved and receive recognition as "stars." Finally, the strongest argument generally made in favor of maintaining smaller schools is that they are much more personal places where students are less likely to feel lost in the crowd.

These arguments still do not provide any "bottom lines" regarding the best size for schools. We still lack final answers to questions in this area. We have eloquent arguments such as those by Goodlad that favor reducing the size of schools whenever possible. On the other hand, we know that taxpayers want assurances that their dollars are being spent in efficient ways. There is nothing absolutely certain regarding the dividends that large or small school size will offer to community. The final resolution of this issue will have to be based largely on the predominant values of a community.

Grade Level Organization

Not many years ago, there were basically only two grade level

organizations in place in school districts around the country. One was called the "8-4" plan (Grades 1 through 8 in elementary schools, Grades 9 through 12 in a high school), while the other was referred to as a "6-3-3" arrangement (Grades 1 through 6 in elementary schools, Grades 7, 8, and 9 in a junior high school, and Grades 10 through 12 in a senior high school). Greater variety of grade level organization has been seen in recent years, and any of these arrangements may be helpful to educational policy makers facing changes in their local districts.

Perhaps the single greatest change in conventional grade level grouping has been the development of the middle school concept. Here the district organization is modified to a "5-3-4" arrangement (Grades 1-5 in elementary schools, Grades 6, 7, and 8 in the middle school, and Grades 9-12 in the high school). The underlying assumption in the middle school organization is that children in the 6th through the 8th grades have particular physical, social, and intellectual development needs that set them apart from elementary students and high school students. They are truly children "in the middle" who deserve their own unique school.

Modifications of the typical middle school grade level organization have been common. A survey conducted by the Educational Research Service in 1983 indicated that schools called "middle schools" around the country sometimes included Grades 5 through 8, 4 through 6, 5 through 7, and Grades 7 and 8 only. The inevitable question from this observation must relate to which of these various groupings appear to be more appropriate than others. A study conducted by Wilfred Dacus at the University of Houston (1963) might provide some interesting clues regarding desirable practices. Dacus developed the following recommendations for appropriate grade organization:

- If a school district has a large male population, Grades 9 and 10 should be together, but there can be any combination of Grades 5 through 8.

- If a school district has a large female population, the following grade pairings should be kept together: Grades 5 and 6, Grades 7 and 8, and Grades 9 and 10.

- If a school district has male and female populations of equal or similar size, a grade pattern combining Grades 6 and 7 and Grades 8, 9, and 10 is recommended.

Dacus' recommendations are based on the principle that boys and girls have psychological developmental needs that can best be addressed through alternative grade patterns. The relationship between grade level organization and student academic achievement is not nearly as well-defined. In fact, studies by Stout (1962) and White (1964) found that organizational factors such as the ways in which grade levels were organized in schools did not in and of themselves have an observable relationship on student performance on standardized achievement tests. On the other hand, there is absolutely no suggestion that different grade groupings have a negative effect on student achievement.

There have been a number of other interesting attempts to find alternative grade arrangements. These may have some value to policy makers seeking to restructure the organizational patterns within their school districts. An example of a pattern that, because it is favorably reviewed in Goodlad's massive study, is receiving widespread review recently is an arrangement where the schools of a district are clustered around smaller ranges of grade groups. For example, elementary schools are no longer self-contained units. Instead, some buildings are converted to primary school centers for grades 1 through 2 or 3, other buildings are reserved for Grades 4 and 5 only, and middle schools are maintained for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. High schools

then remain Grades 9 through 12 facilities, or are also split into different units, one for Grades 9 and 10 and another one for Grades 11 and 12. One local example of a plan similar to this is found in the Goshen, Ohio Local Schools where one building houses children in the first two grades, another building serves Grades 3 and 4, a third building includes Grades 5 and 6, a middle school includes the 7th and 8th grades, and the high school remains a conventional Grades 9 through 12 facility.

The major criticism generally made regarding many alternative grade group patterns is that, unless used in a small district such as Goshen where all students remain together as they move from one building to another, there is a condition where massive readjustments are necessary every two years or so for all students in a district. Children are continually forced to become familiar with new buildings, new teachers, and even more important, new classmates. Such frequent upheaval may indeed have more negative impact on many students that would far outweigh the value of providing schools where there was a more narrow focus on the specific needs of a limited range of student backgrounds.

One additional innovative approach to grade grouping has been seen recently in the Quincy, Illinois schools where several years ago the decision was made to split the one large senior high school (Grades 9 through 12) that enrolled over 3,000 students into two smaller units. One was named Quincy I and included students in Grades 9 and 10 alone, and a separate building, Quincy II, was established for 11th and 12th graders. This program gained considerable national attention during the 1970's as an example of a way in which a huge comprehensive senior high school could be reorganized to benefit students. One important criticism of the plan, however, was the fact that, because there was a physical separation of the two schools,

students were constrained in their selection of courses that were available only in the other building.

As was also the case with decisions related to school size, the final choices regarding grade level organization will have to be made in light of local conditions faced by policy makers. There are some guiding questions that might be considered before any modifications are made in existing patterns. For example, before any sweeping changes are made in the ways in which schools in a district are organized, one must decide what the effect on reorganization will be on students and parents. People are never comfortable with changes in their surrounding, and changes for no good reason will be met with great resistance if there are no compelling reasons for moving children frequently from one building to another. Also, what will changes in grade patterns do to the transportation system in a district? What effect will modifications in grade patterns have on the district's ability to comply with state standards? Will there be any negative impact on the ability of students to take courses of particular interest, or courses that are more accelerated? These and other serious questions need to be addressed before making any major changes in the existing grade level organization in a district.

School Management Trends

The current era of new challenges and expectations has also brought about modifications in the ways in which schools are managed as well. This emphasis on school administration is based largely on the many research findings in recent years that have pointed directly to the role of the school principal and other administrators as key ingredients of effective schools. Emerging management trends have been centered on two primary directions.

One has been toward the issue of increasing the instructional leadership skills of school administrators, while the other has focused on how to make certain that school leaders are more accountable for their work.

The research on effective schools has made it clear that when the principal of the school serves as an instructional leader, the school is more effective. In terms of emerging school management trends, this means that principals, superintendents, and other administrators are increasingly aware that they need to become more directly involved in overseeing what goes on in the classrooms of their schools. What this has meant is that there has been a gradual shift from a definition of the administrator's role as a manager of the school budget, student discipline, and building schedule to one where he or she is a leader in the areas of staff evaluation, instructional goal setting, and curriculum design.

Not many years ago, school administration was looked upon as a subset of general management; if a person was trained in a few fundamental management techniques, he or she could step into a role as an adminstrator of a school, a hospital, or a department store and do an adequate job of "keeping the ship afloat." Now the more accepted view is that the job of the educational administrator is a specialized one which requires a person to learn more about the business of how students learn. As further proof of this trend, one need only consider the new state certification standards for school administrators in the state of Ohio. Within the next few years, a licensed school administrator in this state will be required to take additional course work in areas such as how to teach reading, curriculum development, program evaluation, and staff development.

The second general trend in school management in the last few years has been the increasing expectation that educational administrators will be held more accountable for their work than they were in the past. This trend has been the basis of the adoption of some interesting practices. One of these is the use of management-by-objectives (MBO), a practice where administrators are expected to set specific performance goals toward which they intend to work for a given period of time. In addition to the statement of goals, MBO also requires that managers state the strategies that they plan to use in trying to achieve their goals. The belief with this type of approach to management is that schools and other organizations will be more effective if their leaders are held accountable for the accomplishment of certain tasks.

Also related to the move toward greater accountability have been a few other promising practices. One has been the use of "shared decision making," a concept that holds that administrators seek input from many people--teachers, parents, students, and community members--when they need to make important decisions. The underlying belief is that decisions will be better if they are made after consulting all of the people who will be affected by the decision. Another recent administrative practice adopted in many cases as a way to help school managers become more effective is the management team. Here, all of the administrators in a school or school district work together as a team. The idea behind this approach is that a single administrator does not have all the skills needed to deal with every problem that is likely to arise. A team can include people with a wide array of skills and talents.

The field of school management is a period of transition. As problems facing schools become more complex, the responsibilities of all in education will change. The school administrator is not exempt from this change.

Summary

In this paper, some observations were made about trends in the areas of class size, grade level organization, anad management practices. Educational researchers are working in all of these areas to help provide more information to policy makers as they face many complex problems in schools. Although we have some very useful beginnings, however, we still do not have many absolute answers. The final choices for what to do with what we know will still be the job of local school decision makers. It would be great to have things more direct and simple, but they are not. The problems we face are complex; so too must be the potential solutions.

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